

Gloria Williams has been selected as the 2015 Pima South First Things First Champion for Young Children.

The award is given to local champions who actively volunteer their time to raise public awareness of the importance of early childhood development and health. Champions spend a significant amount of time volunteering with FTF and building public awareness about the importance of early childhood issues.



Williams engaged in awareness-raising efforts such as:

- Participating in ongoing Professional Development together with her staff, modeling what it is to be a lifelong learner- a critical characteristic of an effective early childhood educator and leader.
- Expanding early learning programming in Arivaca, helping an entire community understand the importance of early childhood education and the need for programs that support early learning and health.
- Engaging parents, students and entire families in projects at Sopori Preschool and Arivaca Action Center, establishing herself as a trusted and knowledgeable resource for early education.

We recently caught up with Gloria who works as Director of Sopori Preschool and President of Arivaca Action Center.

Question: Why do you feel early childhood development and health is so important?

Answer: Children are incredible learning beings and what happens during a child's first five years of life is critical to their health, resiliency, school readiness, capacity for lifelong learning and future success. A child's relationships and experiences in the early years influence how a brain wires itself. Parents want to do what is right for their children but may lack the experience, knowledge and tools to benefit children for optimal health and brain development. Early childhood professionals in partnership with parents can have a beneficial impact on communities.

Q: What caused you to get involved in efforts to increase public awareness in early childhood issues?

A: Each child deserves to have quality opportunities and experiences that support his or her full health and development. By serving on Early Childhood Boards and participating in FTF regional and state training, I was connected with a dedicated community of early childhood professionals and advocates, seeing the big picture of systems, providers and services available to meet the needs of our rural communities. Quality child care, parent education and early health and developmental screening are not always part of community conversations. Instead a faulty belief commonly exists that kindergarten is where real learning begins, leaving young children far behind their peers when entering school. As children attend quality centers regularly with responsive caregivers and intentional environments, parents observe remarkable positive growth in their child's development, and learn strategies to support this growth at home.

Q: Why do you feel building awareness in early childhood and developmental health is so important for families and communities?

A: We can only do better when we know better. Reliable research shows that the brain changes in good ways and not so good ways by the experiences we offer our children. When parents understand this connection, they are more likely to be open to receiving new information and using that knowledge to

provide stimulating opportunities for their children. Any capable parent needs support here and there. Families in poverty who struggle with meeting basic survival demands are supported by communities that encourage a collaborative effort in making sure all children are safe, healthy and ready to succeed.

Q: How have you seen awareness for the early years change in your community?

A: There is strong support in our community for early learning programs. In recent years, recruitment for formal birth to 5 early education programs was difficult. Some parents faced many challenges just to meet basic survival needs and did not see a need for education, screening or parent workshops. Now they are eagerly lined up to make sure their child has a slot in the infant, toddler and preschool classrooms. There is a growing awareness that children need safe places with people they can trust who can provide the kinds of experiences and opportunities that are not always available in the home. This developing disposition for learning is laying the foundation for future success in school and for life. Information is not enough. Parents support each other at workshops and celebration events, and share observations and new strategies in a new conversation about the joy and importance of early learning.

Q: How do you suggest other people in your community get involved?

A: There are many ways communities can get involved:

- Attending children's art exhibitions at school.
- Attending family literacy events, annual celebrations.
- Donating as an individual or business to fund a scholarship for a child.
- Joining in annual volunteer Days of Caring events to improve and beautifying early learning facilities.
- Parents and family members reading to their children daily at arrival.
- Checking out Make Way for Books children's literature to read to a child at home every day.
- Joining the conversation about educational benefits for children, families and the community.
- Sending letters to council members sharing stories about positive changes that are occurring in the community.
- Contacting legislators to get a commitment on how they will vote on important early childhood issues.